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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000444

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: RULING PARTY AMENDS GEORGIAN CONSTITUTION AGAIN,  
OPPOSITION PROTESTS

REF: TBILISI 403

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark X. Perry for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary: On March 12, the ruling National Movement (UNM) amended the Georgian Constitution to maintain 75 single-mandate Parliamentary seats for the upcoming election (reftel) and establish 75 party list seats. In response to the proposed amendment, the Labor Party called on all the opposition parties to boycott the upcoming election. Although no other opposition parties have agreed to such a boycott, the United National Council of Opposition (UNC) renewed calls for its nationwide hunger strike begun on March [¶10.](#) On March 11, MP David Gamkrelidze and his New Rightists (NR) party joined the UNC hunger strike. On March 14, Gamkrelidze and the UNC called for Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze's resignation. Approximately 8,000 people rallied with the NR and UNC on March 16 in front of Parliament, as the opposition continued the hunger strike on Parliament's steps. UNC leaders called for a protest at the Embassy on March 19 against President Saakashvili's POTUS meeting. The Republican party did not participate in the rally. Nearly lost in the commotion are amendments to Georgia's election code, which passed their first hearing in Parliament on March [¶15.](#) The amendments show limited improvement to address deficiencies in the code, while posing additional problems. President Saakashvili told the opposition that with time running out the ruling party would have to unilaterally decide on outstanding issues related with the Parliamentary elections this May, if the opposition refused to resume dialogue in the next couple of weeks. End Summary.

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UNM Amends Constitution  
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[¶2.](#) (SBU) On March 12, the UNM used its constitutional majority (two-thirds plus one) in Parliament to again amend the Georgian Constitution and reinstate 75 single-mandate Parliamentary seats for the upcoming election (reftel). The number of party-list seats was reduced to 75 from 100. Opposition MPs did not participate in the vote. (Note: Just last year the UNM had amended the constitution to institute 100 party list seats and 50 majoritarian seats. End note.)

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Labor Calls for Election Boycott  
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[¶3.](#) (U) On March 13, the Labor Party called on all the opposition parties to boycott the upcoming election. They said they would only participate in the election if other "traitor" parties did so. To date, no other opposition parties have agreed to such a boycott and all other parties plan to participate in the election.

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NR, UNC Demand Burjanadze Resign,  
Amid Protest, Hunger Strike  
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¶4. (U) On March 14, Gamkrelidze and his New Rightists (NR) party called for Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze's resignation. On the same day, the Republican party denounced Burjanadze for allegedly violating the terms and spirit of the negotiations they had held with her in the previous weeks. In addition to decrying the 75 single-mandate amendment, Republican Tina Khidasheli said that Burjanadze had not followed through on reported agreements to change the chairmanship of the Central Election Commission. Although they blame her for not maintaining earlier agreements, the Republicans did not join NR in calling for Burjanadze's resignation as they did not believe it would resolve the crisis.

¶5. (U) On March 16, approximately 8,000 people rallied with the NR and UNC at Parliament, as the opposition continued their hunger strike (begun March 9) on Parliament's steps. The protesters were an older crowd, evenly split between men and women. Around 25 tents and 70 hunger strikers were set up on in front of the building. The hunger strike was entering its seventh day. The crowd warmly welcomed MP David Gamkrelidze (also on hunger strike in Burjanadze's office reception area, and appearing gaunt). He again called on Burjanadze to resign. Noticeably absent from the protest were the Republicans and Giorgi Targamadze's new Christian Democrats party. The same day, Saakashvili described the hunger strike action as "not Christian" and said all Georgians should "stand together to protect the country." On

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March 17, Burjanadze said she would resign only if the UNC recognizes Saakashvili as Georgia's legitimate President and drops its other demands.

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UNC Plans Protest at the Embassy  
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¶6. (U) UNC leaders MP Levan Gachechiladze, MP Zviad Dzidziguri, and Koba Davitashvili announced that the UNC will demonstrate in front of U.S. Embassy Tbilisi on Wednesday, March 19 at 1400 to protest Saakashvili's meeting with President Bush. Gachechiladze said that "the U.S. administration should see the will of the Georgian people. We will show the U.S. that Georgia is not a country of experiments. We are building a Georgian state, not an American one." (Note: Gamkrelidze did not/not join in calls for a protest against the U.S. End note.)

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Election Code Amendments Proposed  
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¶7. (U) Nearly lost in the commotion are amendments to Georgia's election code, which passed their first hearing in Parliament on March 15. President Saakashvili told the opposition that with time running out the ruling party would have to unilaterally decide on outstanding issues related with the Parliamentary elections this May, if the opposition refused to resume dialogue in the next couple of weeks. The proposed amendments raise the District Election Commissions (DEC) from 5 members to 13, with 6 members proposed by opposition parties. This does not fulfill the opposition's demand for DEC parity, as the UNM would retain a 7 to 6 majority. The proposal also would increase the DEC's powers, by allowing them to tabulate the results from the precincts and to cancel election results in precincts. The DEC's did not have these powers during the presidential election. The proposal also eliminates same-day registration and voting. Precinct camera footage will be made immediately available,

with restrictions to limit how long a challenge could be reviewed (so as not to drag out the tabulation process). Also in the proposal, majoritarian MP candidates will no longer need supporters' signatures to be officially registered as a candidate. Political parties will only need 30,000 signatures rather than the current 50,000 to be placed on the party list. UNM MP Davit Kirkitadze proposed that four majoritarian seats for lawmakers from South Ossetia and Abkhaz constituencies be allocated from Tbilisi's nine existing majoritarian seats. (Note: Post will attend a roundtable on the proposed amendments with stakeholders on March 18. End note.)

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Comment  
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[18](#). (C) The opposition does not appear to be making much progress with its protests and hunger strike. The protest at the Embassy will be just the second by the opposition at the embassy's new location since the clashes in November 2007. Despite this, the UNM is pressing every advantage. The proposed election code amendments could be problematic. Some proposed steps, such as including the opposition on the DEC's, are positive on the surface. However, giving the DEC's power to tabulate and annul results is contrary to donors' plans to streamline tabulation and maintain transparency and accountability of the Central Election Commission.  
PERRY